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AUTHOR Harrison, S. L.
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ABSTRACT

A return to excellence and ethics can end the bashing of the press and earn it respect. H. L. Mencken was an outstanding press-basher. One problem he identified is that journalists see themselves as professionals, when they are no more than "hired hands" unable to control admission to the craft. A solution Mencken offered was to improve schools of journalism. Newspapers often cite competition from television, but the television carnival can spur serious print professionals to compromise their product. When news reporters become "personalities" and television cult figures, then something is wrong with the business. Back-biting among television and print media promotes press bashing. Contributing to the press credibility issue is the tendency to publish questionable news from vague and dubious sources. One answer is simply to produce a first-rate product. Newspapers must give readers a full and complete account of what is happening and why. With well-trained staff and management, the entire industry can do better. (RS)

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MEDIA ETHICS

A Paper Presented to the International Press Club

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Dr. S. L. Harrison
School of Communication
University of Miami

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BASHING THE PRESS; MAKING NEWS OR REPORTING NEWS?

Opinion polls confirm that a vast majority of Americans hold the press in low repute. Only used-car salesmen and Members of Congress enjoy less esteem by the public. Press-bashing is, apparently, America's second-most popular indoor sport. Much of the general public, and the press as well, denigrate media.

H. L. Mencken, often quoted but little-read by anyone these days, was an outstanding press-basher. This legendary newsman and editor criticized the press, with particular contempt for editors and front-office people. Edna Buchanan--a Pulitzer-winner--recently wrote a three-fold credo for working news reporters: "Never trust an editor; never trust an editor; never trust an editor." Mencken's spirit lives on in that cynical advice. Much that he wrote remains relevant.

One problem Mencken identified is that journalists are victims of illusion. Members of the press, who see themselves as professionals, are no more than a "hired hand," unable to control admission to the craft. Unlike medicine or law, journalism requires no certification or even, some argue, special education. "Codes of ethics," Mencken observed, are mere talk because these cannot be controlled until journalism becomes a profession."

Mencken was especially hard on his fellow practitioners. Most of the troubles of journalism, he wrote, are due to the "stupidity, cowardice and Philistinism" of the average newspaperman.

Mencken singled out the Washington press corps for its general "incompetence and quackery." He also attacked journalism trade journals for not focusing on press shortcomings, preferring to fill their pages with "bilge." Another problem that he identified was "false news," the result of "stupid, sentimental and credulous" people doing work that results in "idiotic reporting." And the plain fact, he pointed out, is that most of the stuff printed emanates from press agents, with little checking to assure correctness. The practice flourishes today; read Charles Osgood's essay on the "factoid." The public is still swamped with "balderdash" presented as "news." An excellent example is the ad-swollen supplement for boat shows or auto shows, filled with bogus "news" supplied by press agents, presented as news without apology by virtually every newspaper.

One solution Mencken offered was to improve schools of journalism. Most of these, he contended, allow easy admission, give snap courses and are "refuges for students too stupid to tackle other professions." Most are simply trade schools, he wrote. Before he left off bashing journalism, Mencken took a swipe at the "so-called press club" in most every city, where "anyone with the price of admission" is welcome. The "grafters and rascals" need to be purged by the "decent" news people, Mencken advised, before "anything can be said about codes of

newspaper ethics." HLM's full comments, in Prejudices, Sixth Series, are still on target.

Of course, Mencken was neither alone nor unique. Other press critics holding sound credentials attacked their trade, often with venom. A. J. Liebling, more read today than Mencken, perhaps, but quoted less, spent 18 years bashing the press for The New Yorker. Newspaper people recall Liebling with affection. Most of his fire, unlike Mencken's, was directed toward management. From time to time, he did identify woeful and biased reporting, but usually the miscreants were owners and publishers. Col. McCormick, William Randolph Hearst and John S. Knight, among other legendary figures, were favorite targets. Everybody likes to blame the bosses. Even amiable William Allen White described Frank Munsey as having "the talent of a meat packer" with "the morals of a money changer." These titans have departed; many of the practices remain.

Corporations, looking at the bottom line, are now in charge. A few--Post-Newsweek, The New York Times, Times-Mirror and Knight-Ridder--set standards of high performance. When a giant gobbles up a plum target--newspaper, magazine, or a television network--no massive agenda is unveiled, no sweeping changes called for. New management merely sets a percentage profit to be met. And each year, that figure is raised several digits. Last year, one magazine editor asked with some pain, "how much is enough?" Modern capitalists, echoing Sam Gompers, the one-time labor czar, reply "more." The craven ownership of Liebling's day

has been replaced by accountants. One result is that newspapers are pricing themselves out of business. But that is not the reason for shoddy work.

When news is rushed to print too soon to check or broadcast on the flimsiest pretext, one rationale is the need to beat the competition. The press has always been on deadline, however. Too often these days, news comes gushing forth unchecked for accuracy, uninvestigated for fact, or just plain wrong. Often, newspapers cite the competition from television. The television carnival can spur serious print professionals to compromise their product. Consequently, the marketplace is full of poor fare.

The TV news docu-dramas, sometimes no more than PR puff-pieces, portray "news" devoid of fact or information. This may be good theater, and perhaps the essence of modern TV, but it is not news or noteworthy. It is good show business; but bad news reporting. Serious journalists do not have to look far for "bashers" when questionable fare is presented as news. Mencken's word, "bilge," comes to mind. This is not reporting news, this is making up news, manufacturing news. Reporters making news, not reporting news, are often the prime attraction on TV news.

When news reporters become "personalities" and television cult figures, then something is wrong with the business. Millions hear what Jack Nelson or Eleanor Clift or Jack Germond say on weekly television. Far fewer read their excellent and trenchant writing for <u>The Los Angles Times</u>, <u>Newsweek</u> or the Baltimore <u>Evening Sun,</u> respectively. Some viewers may seek out what George

Will has written in his perceptive columns after watching him on Sunday morning TV; not too many, one suspects.

The hard fact is, and news people recognize the reality, the news business has changed, not for the better. Newspapers and the weekly magazines have been seduced by television. One of the more dubious newspaper enterprises in recent years attempts to look like TV and reads like TV and, apparently, found a receptive audience--people with a TV-trained attention span. Many newspapers responded. Weather maps now look like a TV screen, with color as well. Weather on TV is a five-minute extravaganza because advertisers pay for it. Copying TV is a mistake.

The road to success for most newspapers still holding pretensions to higher standards of performance lies elsewhere. Attempts to copy TV's approach will surely fail. Similarly, attempts to ape nightly TV frolics, with "happy news" and the like are also doomed. Often, TV sports reporters report scores without mentioning what team won. Newspapers can give a full account the next day, and should. But they frequently do not.

Television brings media people, all smiling and personable, to the public. The print media recognizes this; they often attack each other. Contemporary criticism is now personal. This back-biting promotes bashing. For example-- the press on the campaign trail, once the boys on the bus, covering the presidential hopefuls have been described as "flakes" or "groupies" or "animals" with a "pack instinct," who are often "vindictive." George Will, a critic wrote, was a "toady" for President Ronald

Reagan, writing "petty" columns motivated by "malice." Gary Wills is a "backstabber." Respected editor and writer William F. Buckley was castigated as "narrow-minded" for his support of Patrick Buchanan, who has himself been known to throw a few well-aimed barbs at his former press colleagues. Pat has been identified as a "fascist" with Hitler-like tendencies--but that was as a candidate and perhaps should not count here. Eventually, Buchanan will be back on CNN and other television shows in good standing as a media star.

One thoughtful member of the press attacked the media for its increasing trend to welcome former government office-holders, elected officials turned out of office, and others of this ilk as bonafide members of the fourth estate, no questions asked. David Broder's tart criticism had something to do with conflict-of-interest and credibility. His valid observations were generally ignored, however, as something best forgotten.

Contributing to the press credibility issue is the growing tendency to publish questionable news from vague and dubious sources. The sensational reporting of the alleged affairs of Democratic candidate Bill Clinton comes to mind. Many newspapers were guilty. Perhaps we have an erosion of standards, with finger-pointing all 'round, to justify the hype for a story that at one time would not have qualified as news "fit to print" by our nation's most respected newspapers. Is that what keen competition in the media marketplace requires for survival?

Increasingly cynical readers should then be spared the

pieties of the press and its bleats for continued and full protection under the First Amendment. Broadcasters do not enjoy that same freedom, but we see little concern expressed by the print media for equal rights under the Constitution.

Television is media's step-child. Many of its news stars never saw the inside of a city room and lack legitimate journalism credentials. Some few-- David Brinkley, Andy Rooney, Britt Hume--are excellent journalists. Many simply rip and read. Perhaps Broadcasting magazine is right to term its group the "fifth estate." Television people are notorious for colossal egos and temper tantrums. Dan Rather comes to mind in this context more often than most. All viewers are familiar with the anchor who must look at the cue-card to get his own name correct. One newscaster was described by a colleague (in print) as having "the mental capacity of a pet rock." Perhaps this goes with the makeup and the blow-dried hair. Television is performance journalism.

Television is not the culprit. Like it or not, the public lumps media together into one group. Print media along with the electronic media have a role to play and each can survive.

Bashing is a reaction, not a solution.

One answer is simply to produce a first-rate product. For newspapers the formula is simple: print well-researched, well-written stories. All too often today's newspapers follow the pop-trend seen on the television set in editorial offices. Television portrays events in graphics that talk. Few viewers recall what is said. Newspapers make the mistake of following TV--a lead often

set by people who know little news.

Newspapers must give readers a full and complete account of what is happening and why. Take, for example, the sports pages. Not the domain of the intellectual, but lots of people buy newspapers to read sports news. Many of the remaining morning papers, alone in a one-newspaper town, close up shop early and simply fail to report the late scores. Consequently, more and more people simply do not buy the paper. Publishers lament the loss of readership; very few take time to examine their product.

Increasingly, newspapers are adopting the "magazine" look. If people want magazines, they will buy magazines. Too few people get the kind of newspaper they want: a newspaper with news. Too many newspaper people use the godawful term "newshole." Too often that is exactly what it is, a hole.

One of my former employers was a newspaper-- at that time proud, arrogant, independent and one of the best-- The Sun, in Baltimore. Its editor, Charles Dorsey, was known to throw out an entire ad page for breaking news. Buck Dorsey's paper had no news-hole. No one would have dared use the term. His was a newspaper of uncommon merit. Those standards can still be met; excellence should, at the very least, be a goal.

Russell Baker's Good Times eloquently recalls that era, the good and bad. Today, with well-trained staff and management, the entire industry can do better. A return to excellence and ethics can end the bashing and earn respect. If not, the fault, as Edward R. Murrow once quoted, "lies in ourselves."